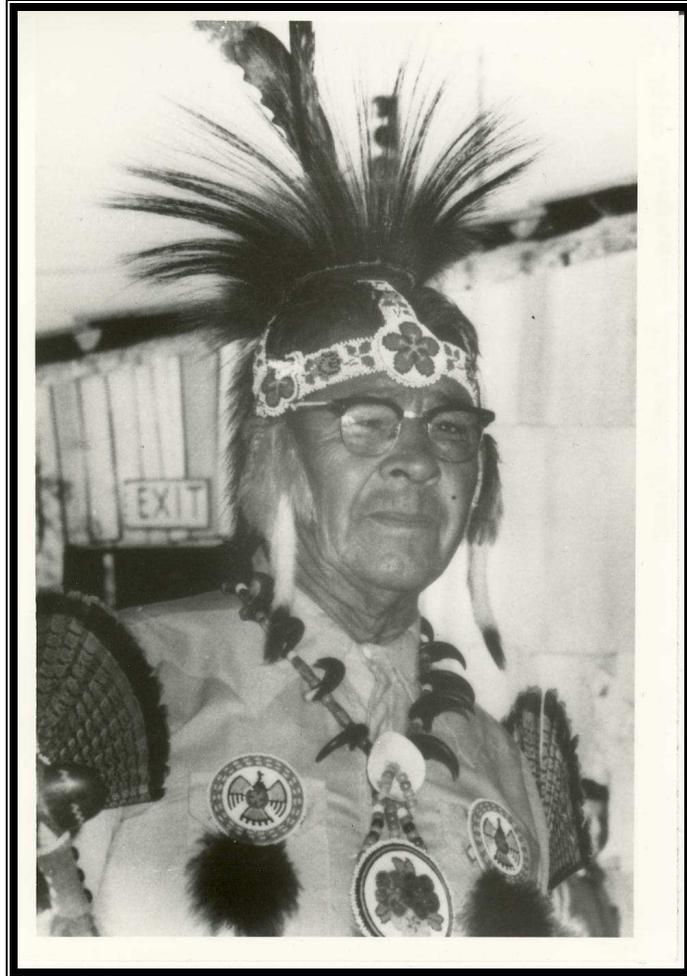


The Origins of the Michif Language

By Chief Patrick Gourneau



Patrick Gourneau¹
Chief of the Turtle Mountain Band of
Chippewa Indians

The language, which the “Mechifs” originated in the early days of their formation as a group, is a remarkable language. Its vocabulary is far superior to the Indian mother tongues of Cree and Plains-Ojibway, which constitutes part of the language. Actually it is a jargon (sic) involving a unique mixture of French, Cree, Plains-Ojibway and English.

¹ Patrick Moses Gourneau was born in 1904, the son of Joseph and Eliza Gourneau. His grandfather, Joseph Gornan signed the Old Crossing Treaty with the Pembina and Red Lake Bands of Chippewa Indians. Patrick was Tribal Chairman of the Turtle Mountain Band between 1954 and 1958, when he had to resign because of ill health. He wrote a history of the Turtle Mountain people and took a strong leadership role in the revival of traditional customs. In 1986, he was awarded the North Dakota Heritage Profile Honour Award. He died in 1989. (The photograph is #C 3639, courtesy of the State Historical Society of North Dakota.)

French and Cree Indian's words dominate the jargon, and with the addition of Plains-Ojibway and English words the size of the vocabulary was greatly increased. The whole mixture of words was termed "Cree," but it differs greatly from the real Cree. Inclusion of much more Cree than Plains-Ojibway words indicate there was much closer association between the "Mechifs" and Cree than there was between them and the Plains-Ojibway at the time the jargon was in its adoption stage.

Many of the older people of the reservation spoke an archaic French dialect, with a few Cree and Plains-Ojibway words thrown in. Usually the Indian words used were given a French twist and often mispronounced. Other older people reversed the style by speaking more Indian words than French and by giving the French words an Indian twist at times and also mispronunciation. Many individuals of the last mentioned group were, however, capable of speaking the real Plains-Ojibway and Cree. "Mechifs" of Scotch and English origin usually tossed in an English word now and then along with the French and Indian words. This last mentioned group, mostly from Canada, were termed "Les Mechif Anglais." Most of this type of "Cree" speakers of the past and present time used the French and Indian words in a very loose manner and gave little thought to correct pronunciation, and even went as far as changing the true meaning of Indian words to something different. The changes in true meaning of words renders the "Cree" language fully understandable only to "les Mechif" and some full-bloods who learned to speak it.

Spur of the moment coinage of words was also a common practice. When someone was stuck for a word he could make one up right on the spot, and sometimes when he was at a loss for a word in one language he would reach out and grab one from another language. The time is now fast approaching when the "Cree" language will be lost forever on the reservation. This loss, common to all nationalities in America, also applies to the real Cree and Plains-Ojibway languages. Being educated in the English language only, the present day younger generations of the reservations prefer to speak English only and very few of them can speak any of the three reservation native languages, "Mechif Cree", the real Cree and Plains-Ojibway. Therefore, the loss of the "Mechif" culture and their "Cree" language is in sight, and the same can be said of true Indian culture and their languages, Plains-Ojibway and real Cree. Plains-Ojibway language underwent a very noticeable change from the Woodlands Ojibway, especially in the accent and composition of words. True Ojibway accent swayed considerably toward Cree and Ottawa, and many true Cree and some Ottawa words are used. The change is due to close association on the Plains by the three tribes.

Many of the present day enrolled members of the Turtle Mountain Band are descendants of "Mechif" refugees involved in the 1869-1870 rebellion in Manitoba, Canada and the 1885 rebellion in Saskatchewan, Canada. As a matter of fact, when the McCumber Commission Tribal Roll was being prepared in 1892, some members of the Band claimed that the refugees of the Louis Riel Rebellions of Canada strongly influenced the McCumber Commission to exclude many American Chippewas from the

Turtle Mountain Band tribal roll. Some members of the Band at the time are even quoted as saying that the refugees “ran the show.”²



Compiled and edited by Lawrence Barkwell
Coordinator of Metis Heritage and History Research
Louis Riel Institute

² Aun nish e naubay (Patrick Gourneau) *History of the Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa Indians*. Belcourt, North Dakota: Turtle Mountain Band, 1971: 11-12.